CONSERVATION Showcase

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Rotational Grazing Pays for Bedford Man

Rotational grazing is paying off for a Taylor County farmer. Paul Ackley, of Bedford, says he can raise the same number of cattle on one-third less land thanks to rotational grazing. He installed fences, cattle watering tanks and lines, and methodically moves his 100-head of cattle among 15 paddocks so they always have fresh grass.

U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) helped design and fund the building of Ackley's watering systems and fencing in 2006.

Ackley said he's found a number of benefits to rotational grazing. "The big benefit," he said, "is needing only two acres per cow instead of three. This means we can now devote 120-acres of former pastureland to standing winter hay.

"Another benefit we have found," he said, "is that flies tend to stay with manure. The manure helps us two ways. When we move cattle, the flies stay behind. This eliminates our need to spray cattle for flies. The manure also reduces our fertilizer bill by $8,000 per year because our pastures do not need chemical fertilizers."

Ackley's use of rotational grazing is a 180-degree turn from five years ago. "I used to think it was silly to fence cattle out of a pond," he said, "but now I can see that's the way it should be."

Cattle are like mini-bulldozers to Ackley. "When they go down to a pond to drink, they push soil into the water, pollute it and fill it,"

Paul Ackley

he said. "Soon I've got a major expense to dig it out so cattle can drink from it again."

"Thanks to rotational grazing," said Ackley, "the 'bulldozers' are leaving my stream banks and ponds alone. That saves me a lot of time I can devote to other things."

Doug Davenport is the NRCS district conservationist for Taylor County. He says he sees this conservation practice as just one more the Bedford man uses to save soil. "Paul Ackley is a Conservation Security Program (CSP) participant which clearly demonstrates his strong belief in conservation," said Davenport.

I didn't happen all at once. Ackley has been farming for 40 years. Over much of that time, Ackley and the team of conservationists at the Taylor County Soil and Water

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Conservation District have worked together planning, finding financial assistance, and designing and installing many conservation practices on his 1,100 acres. "NRCS, Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) have all worked with him on many soil saving practices," said Davenport. "On his farm you can find filter strips, no-till, terraces, grassed waterways, wetland construction, and riparian buffers. It was a logical next step to suggest Paul apply for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) financial assistance to help set up a prescribed grazing system for his cattle."

Davenport's team designed a paddock system for Ackley that allows him to use rotational grazing and keeps his cattle away from pond and stream banks. Water for the cattle is gravity fed from an erosion control structure and can be piped in from a high pressure water source on Ackley's farm.

Ackley says this is the way to go. "I am very happy," he said. "The cows are no longer ruining my ponds and stream banks. Cattle are getting better quality water because they are not loafing in the ponds and streams fouling the water they drink. Rotational grazing forces them to loaf elsewhere and scatter their manure evenly. Cattle end up getting better water and better grass. I like this system. It is a better way to raise cattle on fewer acres of land."

See your local NRCS office for information on rotational grazing, EQIP or other conservation programs and practices.

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Bedford farmer Paul Ackley checks cattle watering tanks that are part of a new rotational grazing system NRCS designed for his farm. Ackley says he likes rotational grazing because the system allows him to raise the same number of cattle with one-third less land.